

*The Third Wave Feminism Museum*

**An Honors Thesis (Honors 499)**

**By**

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tim D. Berg". The signature is stylized with a large, looped "B" and a trailing flourish.

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## Abstract

This project aims to examine third-wave feminism as its own movement apart from the previous women's rights initiatives in America. The third wave is often overlooked when examining the feminist movement because it focuses efforts more on altering our social consciousness rather than instituting legislative reform. Many Americans have a conclusive or dismissive attitude when third-wave feminism is mentioned, arguing that equality has largely been achieved and anyone who begs to differ is simply an angry, bitter woman determined to emasculate and destroy her male counterparts. Because of such popular connotations of feminism, many young women have distanced themselves from the movement, creating a divisive rift between prior generations of women who were active in the second wave between 1960-1980.

Specifically, the project examines the unique history within the third wave, treating it as its own entity. The causes, influences, and issues will be discussed, as well as the social factors that allowed this movement to have a lasting impact.

In terms of formatting the project, I have created a virtual museum that addresses the aforementioned issues. The website includes several exhibitions, interactive elements, and resources for educators. As a sample, I have included the front page of the website. However, the museum is not meant to be experienced on paper. To visit the museum and tour the exhibitions, please visit [www.mattdavben.com/feminism](http://www.mattdavben.com/feminism).

## Acknowledgements

Creating a digital museum was an ambitious task that required an abundance of time, patience, and creativity. The final product would not be what it is without the assistance of Matthew Bennett and his programming skills. I would like to thank Matthew for his dedication to the project and for helping me translate my ideas into complex programming code.

I would also like to thank my advisor, Dr. Tim Berg, for his guidance during this project and for allowing me to be creative and pursue my interests.

When I first started conceptualizing this project, I was unclear of my objectives and lacked a sense of direction. I knew that I was passionate about feminism, but I was unsure of how that would appropriately translate into a senior honors thesis. While women's history is undeniably complex and fascinating, I knew that it would be difficult to create a finished product that would not only reach a potentially large audience, but would also challenge preconceived notions of feminism. When I realized that my background in public history and my interest in museum studies could be utilized to share my research on third-wave feminism, the scope of the project became much larger.

My interest in museum studies and public history stem from my core belief that history should not be reserved for academics that have formal training and advanced degrees. Their contributions to history are undoubtedly valuable, and the general public has much to learn from them. However, the discipline of history will stagnate if the public and amateur historians are not included in the process. Digital history is a subfield within history that is rapidly expanding and affords curious individuals the opportunity to begin exploring the intricacies of history.

Similarly, the third wave of feminism is an egalitarian movement. It openly criticizes the second wave for not being entirely inclusive of African American women or lesbians. A digital museum and third-wave feminism are closely linked in that both are recent developments in their respective fields. Both are attempting to dispel prior notions about what it means to do history, or what it means to be a feminist. After considering this idea, the choice to create a digital museum on third-wave feminism was a natural conclusion.



One of the tough tasks of any museum curator or executive director rests with making critical decisions about what is important information. Because space is often limited, these choices must be made carefully in order to preserve the integrity of the topic of discussion. While digital museums theoretically have an infinite amount of space in which to share ideas, curatorial decisions must still be made. Too much information and too many artifacts will add unnecessary heft to the museum and distract from the major objectives. Too few artifacts and the museum is left feeling incomplete, and visitors miss out on key information that can enhance understanding.

With this in mind, I set out to tell the story of third-wave feminism to two different groups of viewers. First, I want visitors who have never heard of this movement to come to this digital space and leave with a greater understanding of the important thematic developments that have shaped feminism. Secondly, I want people familiar with the ideas of feminism and the third wave to visit the museum and feel engaged, interact with the space, and leave feeling as though their perspective has been broadened. Appealing to these two different groups requires me to walk a tenuous line between being too didactic and too presumptuous. This can be accomplished through a variety of means, but I chose ways that made sense for a digital space with my specific audience in mind.

In an effort to accommodate the diverse individuals who may visit the museum, I settled on labels that were concise and provided a clear explanation of each artifact. However, several of the artifacts are accompanied by expanded label information that be read if the visitor wishes to learn more. For textual artifacts, I have chosen to provide a selected excerpt that gives the viewer a general overview of the document. However, the

entirety of each document is also available, should curious visitors want to read more from the piece. While museums house timeless artifacts, museums themselves are not permanent in their structure. Museums must be responsive to the needs to the visitor, and alternative methods can certainly be explored to ensure for greater accessibility.

This thesis involves extensive research on third-wave feminism, but it also involves the designing of a virtual museum. With that in mind, it deviates from standard research and becomes something that the general public is able to understand and appreciate. As I thought about how to best make the museum accessible, I thought about what I, as a museum visitor, have come to enjoy. When I think of my favorite museum experiences, they all had clear information, each had a clear mission, and they left room for individual thought and exploration. I designed the virtual space with those ideals in mind, and the museum continues to evolve as I see fit.

Although I certainly have my own opinions about the important ideas and events in feminist history, I also understand that some people may have different interests. Perhaps the idea of third-wave feminism is not particularly enthralling to a visitor, but they are interested in learning more about female punk bands of the 1990s. The museum allows for the visitor to explore independently. While there are buttons that allow for the exhibit to be viewed continuously, I have also allowed for the visitor to create their own experience by browsing each artifact on its own.

In creating a digital museum for a scholarly thesis, I came across issues with negotiating between the voice and tone for the completed project. The museum's objects required extensive research and interpretive planning, but much of the research is ultimately disseminated in order for a general audience to understand. The challenge is

providing enough information to provide a concrete understanding and to give the museum legitimacy while simultaneously not bogging the project down in an institutional, academic tone. Although scholarly research on third-wave feminism is important, the objective of the virtual museum is to convey the story of the third wave to those who are unfamiliar with gender studies. In other words, I want this virtual space to be a place where people feel comfortable and engaged, not intimidated or confused.

After I laid the framework for the tone of the museum, I also had to consider how much information to provide in my text panels, or labels. Traditionally, museum labels are less than one hundred words and are composed at an eighth-grade level. Similar to how journalists of popular publications write, it was my responsibility to write concise labels that would reveal the core message with little extraneous language. The need for concision is also necessitated when examining trends in attention spans in museums. Countless studies have been conducted regarding the length of time museum visitors spend examining objects and text panels. The average individual will spend an average of seventeen seconds viewing an object, and only ten seconds will be spent looking at the label.<sup>i</sup> With this information in mind, it seemed illogical to accompany each object with a daunting amount of text. What seemed more important, however, was to compose captivating supplementary information that enhanced the viewer's understanding of the object in ways that were not cumbersome. It is for this reason that many of the labels fall under one hundred words.

Interactivity has become a large part of the museum experience. Prior to the 1970s, museums were places with relic rooms and a single curator interpreting the content. Museums have since evolved to become destinations for all ages. Part of this is

out of economic necessity. Museums are now competing with other tourist destinations and individuals are choosing which facilities are worth their money. With that in mind, it is no longer enough to have objects or works of art hanging on a wall to grab the public's attention and get them in the door. While there are people who will probably still visit museums regardless of their interactive elements, many individuals wish to be entertained. With the rise of interactivity in museums came criticism from traditionalists who believed that museums were straying from their original intent of preserving and presenting history. Such individuals labeled this phenomenon "edutainment."

Walt Disney's EPCOT is a prime example of edutainment and the controversies surrounding interactivity in public historical settings. Built in the 1970s, EPCOT, or the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, was created to be an immersive experience with history. While EPCOT garnered attention and record-breaking profits for the Disney empire, it did not necessarily depict history truthfully. Rather, the history presented at EPCOT was one that could be marketed to a mass audience, digested easily, and entertain all ages with little controversy. EPCOT is particularly lacking in historical credibility when discussing social movements of the 1960s. Rather than confront the thorny issues of civil rights, the feminist movement, and the Vietnam War, the entire decade is smoothed over with the attractive highlights of the period.<sup>ii</sup> Although the public is highly entertained with videos, photos, hands-on activities, and holographic images of historical figures, the understanding and overall significance appears to be lost.

With this museological debate in mind, I faced several choices when creating the digital museum. One of the challenges I consistently faced was in the area of interactivity. Particularly with digital museums, it can be difficult to craft interactive

spaces where ideas can be reinforced. Without interactive elements, a digital museum can feel like an ordinary website with images that can be scrolled through. If visitors at physical museums desire a more interactive experience than looking at objects, visitors of digital museums are also looking for ways to engage multiple senses. However, I also have found it difficult to devise elements that did not cheapen the overall message of the project. When dealing with a subject matter such as feminism, it is important to not devalue the movement or oversimplify. At the same time, I wanted the museum to be intellectually accessible to various ages.

After thinking about my various options, I opted for a mixture of methods that I feel can be expanded upon as the museum progresses in development. The museum remains primarily a collection of images and videos with supplementary information. However, I have added some elements that I believe can assist in making the experience more meaningful. For example, I have given visitors the option to Tweet or Facebook specific items to engage those who utilize social media as a primary communication tool.

People of all ages visit museums to learn and interact with history, but school groups in particular visit museums with the objective of providing their students with primary source material for what is currently being taught in the classroom. Over the past decade, America's educational system has moved toward standardization, compartmentalizing specific subjects and core ideas that must be taught at each grade level. The revised state standards, coupled with budget cuts and unfunded mandates, have limited the amount of field trips to museums and other cultural institutions. Although such trips may be fun for the students, the teachers must have a pedagogical purpose in taking a field. If museums are not accommodating educators by providing

valuable educational materials, both the museum and the school miss out on an important opportunity to interact and introduce students to resources within the community.

Whether museums agree with state standards or not, they are a facet of American education that teachers must abide by. Museums have an obligation to tailor their exhibitions and resources in an effort to be inclusive of the needs of educators. Many museums have tackled this issue by focusing more on quality than quantity in devising activities that engage the students while satisfying educational requirements.<sup>iii</sup> When developing the Third Wave Museum, I thought about how to do this digitally. Even though surfing a website is quite different than renting buses, paying admission, and taking an entire school day to visit a museum, it still requires time that could be spent reading a textbook. I wanted to give educators a reason peruse the museum with their students, as well as get students thinking about issues of gender at an early age. One of the main challenges I stumbled upon when devising educational activities is how to get young students to understand feminism and gender equality.

While the message is pretty simple, some of the issues that are touched upon are ideas that can be sensitive to elementary school students. For example, the issues of rape and abortion are of a mature nature and teachers may feel uncomfortable or unable to address these issues in the classroom. Ultimately, the decision of what to view rests with the educator or visitor. I created a resources page for teachers that includes post-site activities that they can do on their own with their students. As an example of how these activities pertain to standards, I have included Indiana state standards that are fulfilled through these activities. While standards vary from each state, the basic ideas of understanding historical chronology, civic engagement, and social movements are all

identified through these activities. Such activities can be done while viewing the museum online or can be done at the teacher's convenience.

From a reflective standpoint, devising activities and corresponding them to state academic standards was an informative exercise. As a museum educator of a physical museum, I frequently have to update the educational resources at the museum to reflect the changing state standards. Doing so with a digital museum is more difficult in that it is harder to determine what is working for students and what needs further development. Understanding is easier to gauge when the museum educator is in front of the students, but harder to interpret when the museum is being visited remotely.

It goes without saying that creating an online museum has its difficulties and obstacles. The project required immense focus and foresight, which can be difficult when there are so many different ideas about what the final product should be. One of the biggest challenges I have faced has nothing to do with coding or research, but with my high standards and sometimes-unrealistic expectations.

I had originally planned to do six exhibitions that tracked the progression of the third wave. However, I had to ultimately scale back the project upon realizing that one person would not be able to create six virtual exhibitions with such a limited schedule. I also planned to include an interactive timeline, but time became an issue in that respect as well. Scaling back the project and reevaluating my expectations was incredibly difficult. I initially felt disappointed that my original plan did not match my finished project, but I soon realized that museum professionals grapple with the same issues. Space, time, and availability of resources limit curatorial projects in the same way that I have been limited. The various challenges have been a learning experience that I did not expect. While

learning about how to present an issue that I care about, I also learned about my strengths and weaknesses, as well as how to take pride in the creative choices I have made.

Despite the challenges, creating this museum has been the most rewarding project I have completed in my undergraduate career. I am invested in creating quality museum experiences, and I have a passion for talking about feminism. It is my hope that others will stumble upon the museum and leave the virtual space with a new perspective and understanding of the third wave.

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<sup>i</sup> Jefferey K. Smith and Lisa F. Smith, "Spending Time on Art," *Empirical Studies of the Arts* Vol. 29, no. 2. 2001: 229.

<sup>ii</sup> Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996: 153-156.

<sup>iii</sup> Cary Caron, "The End of History Museums: What's Plan B." *The Public Historian*, 30 (2008): 15-17.



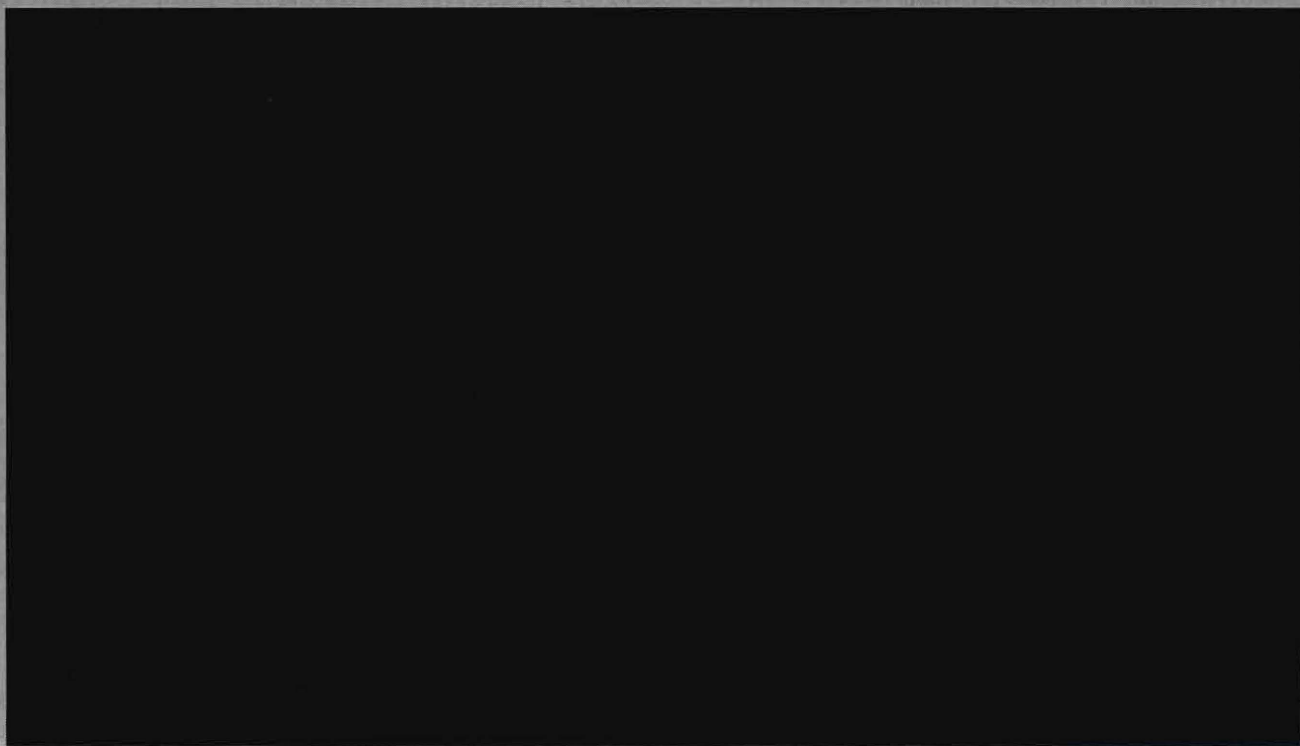
***<http://mattdavben.com/feminism/>***

The following page is a sample of the Third Wave Museum. The home page introduces individuals to feminism and the third wave. From here, visitors are free to explore the exhibitions. Aside from the exhibitions, they are also able to read my artist statement and reflection. I have included a Resources page with educational activities and academic standards for teachers. The home page includes a brief video that discusses common reactions and connotations of feminism. Of course, a video is not meant to be seen on paper. The various exhibitions and activities within the museum can only be experienced online. Please follow the link listed above to browse the galleries and visit the Third Wave Feminism Museum.

# What is Third Wave Feminism?

Much like the ending of the first wave, the end of the second wave brought about declarations that feminism was dead. However, the late 1980s and early 1990s gave rise to a resurgence of feminist activity as women discovered more unresolved issues that had yet to be addressed in the changing world. . While the third wave still focuses on certain legislative gains such as equal pay, paid maternity leave, and wider accessibility of birth control, the third wave centers primarily on challenging social perceptions of gender to work toward a more equal society.

Although the third wave has been undeniably important to paving an equal path for women, feminism and the movement itself remains largely misunderstood. The following video is a sampling of some general impressions of feminism, the third wave, and how people identify with the term "feminist."





## Abigail Adams Letter to John Adams

1. Abigail Adams. *Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March, 1776*. Letter. From Margaret A. Hogan and C. James Taylor, ed., *My Dearest Friend: Letters of Abigail and John Adams*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, 109-111.
2. David McCullough, *John Adams*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001: 54-56.
3. Margaret A. Hogan and C. James Taylor, ed., *My Dearest Friend*: 112.

## Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I A Woman?"

1. Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman?" (speech, Women's Convention, Akron, Ohio, 1851). From Internet History Sourcebooks, Fordham University, New York: 1997. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook.asp>
2. Jean M. Humez, "Reading *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* as a Collaborative Text." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Volume 16, No. 1 (1996): 31-33.

## The Declaration of Sentiments

1. Jennifer Chapin Harris, "Celebrating Women's Herstory: The Story of Seneca Falls." *Off Our Backs*, Volume 28, No. 7 (July 1998), 9.

## First Issue of Ms. Magazine

Abigail Pogrebin, "How Do You Spell Ms.: An Oral History of 'Ms.' Magazine. *New York Magazine*: October 2011: 4-5.

## Time Magazine - "Is Feminism Dead?"

1. Erica Jong, "Ally McBeal and Time Magazine Can't Keep Good Women Down," *New York Observer*, July 1998.
2. Elaine J. Hall and Marnie Salupo Rodriguez, "The Myth of Postfeminism," *Gender and Society* Vol. 17, no. 6 (Dec. 2003): 879-880.

## National Woman's Party

1. "Tactics and Techniques of the National Woman's Party Suffrage Campaign." *American Memory*. Library of Congress.
2. Inez Haynes Irwin, *The Story of the Woman's Party*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company (1921): 196-198.

## Betty Friedan's "The Feminist Mystique"

Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, "Who's the Next Gloria? The Quest for the Third Wave Superleader" in *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*, ed. by Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003: 166-167.

## Protest at the Miss America Pageant

Nell Greenfieldboyce, "Pageant Protest Sparked Bra-Burning Myth." National Public Radio: Echoes of 1968: September 2008.

## Gloria Steinem's "I Was A Playboy Bunny"

Gloria Steinem, "I Was a Playboy Bunny," in *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983: 35.

## The Equal Rights Amendment



Jane J. Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986: 68-69.

## The Bechdel Test

Neda Ulaby, "The Bechdel Rule Defining Pop-Culture Character," *All Things Considered*. National Public Radio, 2008.

## Bikini Kill

Gayle Wald, "Just a Girl? Rock Music, Feminism, and the Cultural Construction of Female Youth." *Signs*, Vol. 23, No. 3: 1998, 595-596.

## Ani DiFranco

1. Anna Feigenbaum, "'Some Guy Designed This Room I'm Standing In:' Marketing Gender in Press Coverage of Ani DiFranco." *Popular Music*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Jan. 2005): 38-40.
2. Ibid, 43.

## Guerilla Girls

"Guerilla Girls: Women and Culture," *Off Our Backs*, Vol. 27, 2007: 32.

## Joyce Carol Oates

Ellen G. Friedman, "Feminism, Masculinity, and Nation in Joyce Carol Oates' Fiction," *Studies in the Novel*, 2006.

## Faux Feminism

Anna Breslaw, "The Unfuckables." *The New Inquiry*, May 2012

## Lilith Fair

Ronald D. Lankford, Jr., *Women Singer-Songwriters in Rock: A Populist Rebellion in the 1990s*. Lanham, Scarecrow Press, 2010: 114-118.

## Riot Grrrl Movement

Mary Celeste Kearney, "Riot Grrrl: It's Not Just Music, It's Not Just Punk," in *The Girls' History and Culture Reader*, edited by Miriam Forman-Brunell and Leslie Paris. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001: 300-305.

## Sleater-Kinney

1. Rachel Fudge, "Girl, Unreconstructed: Why Girl Power is Bad for Feminism"" in *Bitchfest: Ten Years of Cultural Criticism from the Pages of Bitch Magazine*, edited by Lisa Jervis and Andi Zeisler. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006: 155-161.
2. Marion Leonard, *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock, Discourse, and Girl Power*. Ashgate: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007: 154-155.

## Antifeminism

Heather Bullock and Julian Fernald, "Feminism Lite?" *Feminism Identification, Speaker Appearance, and Perceptions of Feminist and Antifeminist Messages*, *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 27 (2003), 2.

## What Is First Wave Feminism?

Carol Berkin, *First Generations: Women in Colonial America*. Hill and Wang: New York, 1996 (5-9).  
Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, *The F Word: Feminism in Jeopardy*. Seal Press: Emeryville, 2004 (20-23).

## What Is Second Wave Feminism?

## Reflection

1. Jefferey K. Smith and Lisa F. Smith, "Spending Time on Art," *Empirical Studies of the Arts* Vol. 29, no. 2. 2001: 229.
2. Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996: 153-156.
3. Cary Caron, "The End of History Museums: What's Plan B." *The Public Historian*, 30 (2008): 15-17.